

The May Review

Our lead article this month assesses the sources and quality of international statistics on hours worked. As with any effort at international comparison, much work has to be done to standardize concepts, measures, and sources as much as possible for the comparisons to be meaningful. As the author Susan E. Fleck notes, “Measuring and comparing how many hours people spend at work across countries is not an exact science, despite recent improvements in methodology and data coverage.” But, in an era of ever-increasing global markets and trade, it is an invaluable exercise to undertake. The article describes and contrasts data for 13 developed economies as far back as 1980. It particularly emphasizes differences in hours-worked data collected from surveys of businesses and households and those gathered from administrative sources.

2008 was not a good year overall for employment trends in the U.S. labor market. As Katherine Klemmer discusses in her article, job openings and hires both declined in 2008. This downward trend, coupled with an upward trend in layoffs and discharges, should not be surprising in light of the rise in unemployment and decline in employment that have characterized the recession which began at the end of 2007. The author summarizes developments in openings and hires for the nation as a whole, for regions, and by industry.

The Bureau’s Business Employment Dynamics (BED) program has become an increasingly watched data source for quarterly insight on the U.S. economy. Three BLS economists—Akbar Sadeghi, James R. Spletzer, and David M. Talan—present new time series from the BED program of annual gross job

gains and gross job losses. Their article provides a detailed explanation of how these new series have been created and the unique value added by their availability. They present comparisons of the new series with the quarterly BED statistics and with similar statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

There has been a great deal of research and discussion about how workplace injuries and illnesses are measured and whether the current program conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which collects and tabulates employer reports, is fully accurate. Nicole Nestoriak and Brooks Pierce describe a recent study that compared case records from the BLS program with information from Workers’ Compensation claims databases. They present some additional findings by analyzing a subset of the data used in the recent study. Their goal is to extend the aggregate results reported by the other authors in order to shed light on the types of cases the BLS survey may undercount.

BLS news releases

Among the various methods of data dissemination, the news release format has been used by BLS for a very long time. The national office of BLS routinely publishes about 170 or so news releases per year, with many others issued by the regional offices. Some are produced monthly, some quarterly, some annually, and some irregularly. Releases typically contain data published for the first time. They include descriptive and analytical text about the figures, technical information about data sources, methods, and so on, and tables containing data at detailed levels, cross-tabulated by different variables.

It has been quite some time since the Bureau assessed how it uses the

news release format and how effective the format is. Starting in the summer of 2008, BLS began such as assessment. It elicited feedback from interested parties in a number of ways: conducting focus groups with journalists, requesting comments from the BLS Data Users Advisory Committee, setting up an evaluation by BLS cognitive psychologists who assist the agency evaluating the clarity of some of its public communications, and having internal reviews conducted by the Bureau’s program and publications offices.

As a result of this review process, BLS has decided to produce news releases that focus with greater clarity on the most important analytical points and succinctly provide recent and historical context relevant to each analytical story. Starting in the summer of 2009, BLS will begin to introduce these changes to the news releases that contain data designated as Principal Federal Economic Indicators (PFEIs). The monthly Employment Situation and Consumer Price Index releases are two examples of such news releases. The formats of the text sections of the news releases also will become more standardized. There will be no change in the data published, only in the textual discussion of the data.

In the future, BLS intends to expand the review process to include its other (non-PFEI) news releases and, as a result, may implement similar changes to those releases. Timelines for that phase of the news release review process have not yet been established.

Information on the news release review process can be found on the BLS Web site at www.bls.gov/bls/changes_to_text_sections_of_nrs.htm. This page will be updated as more information about the process becomes available. □